

Why lawmakers might finally pass a bill to address the state's crumbling transportation infrastructure

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Mary Wisniewski

 It may be hard to imagine now, but the November election will soon be in the rearview mirror.

The ads will stop.

ADVERTISING

Christmas will come.

And then there could be a transportation capital bill to fund badly needed fixes to the state's roads, bridges and public transit systems. Local transit advocates and lawmakers say they think that after 10 years without a big infusion of funding, the time is finally here.

"I am cautiously optimistic that we'll see a solution in 2019," said state Rep. David Olsen, a Republican from Downers Grove. "People on both sides of the aisle see a need and want to realistically and seriously address the problem."

Kirk Dillard, chairman of the Regional Transportation Authority, which oversees and funds Metra, the CTA and Pace, said leaders in both the Illinois House and Senate have indicated that they favor such a bill.

"Regardless of who the governor is, we will have a capital construction program. ... Illinois is crumbling," said Dillard. He said that 31 percent of all the mass transit assets in northeastern Illinois are beyond their useful life — on a system ridden by 2 million people every work or school day.

"I literally ride on a BNSF Metra train car that was delivered during the Eisenhower administration," said Dillard.

The last capital program for infrastructure was in 2009.

Transit advocates also say they are looking for more than just a one-shot infusion of capital money, and instead want a more sustainable source of revenue.

"This isn't a good way to do this — every 10 years have a big infusion and then starvation," said Audrey Wennink, director of transportation for the Metropolitan Planning Council, a Chicago-based public policy group.

Funding sources

If the legislature does come up with a bill next year, it also will have to figure out a way to pay for it.

A spokeswoman for J.B. Pritzker, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate, said that he would prioritize a comprehensive capital bill to leverage as much federal money as possible. Pritzker has named expanding gaming as a possible source of revenue, as well as taxes obtained from legalizing marijuana and sports betting.

Laurence Msall, president of the Civic Federation, a fiscal watchdog group, cautioned against using a "gimmick" like a marijuana or sports betting tax to fund transportation infrastructure. "That is not a sustainable revenue source for the need," said Msall.

Pritzker also said in a January interview that he would be willing to test a way of taxing vehicles by the number of miles driven. Rauner, the incumbent Republican governor, has attacked the idea.

A spokesman for Rauner said a large capital bill is a "top priority" for the governor's second term, to be paid for with "responsible bonding and balanced budgets" that prioritize infrastructure and transportation projects. Rauner also wants more public-private partnerships, and does not support raising the gas tax, the spokesman said.

Olsen said he thinks the bill would likely be funded by more traditional funding streams, like an increase in the gas tax. The gas tax is 19 cents a gallon and has not been raised since 1991, when Ryne Sandberg was still with the Cubs.

Illinois is behind most other states in finding new money for transportation. Since 2012, 31 states have approved plans to raise additional transportation revenues, mostly through a hike in the gas tax, according to Transportation for America, a nonprofit advocacy group.

This includes politically conservative Indiana, which last year upped its fuel taxes by 10 cents per gallon and indexed the rates to inflation, while adding annual fees for electric vehicles. Planned projects include the \$1.2 billion expansion of the South Shore Line between downtown Chicago and northwest Indiana, which carries just 12,000 riders per weekday, compared with 300,000 for Metra.

Signs of Stress

The state's transit infrastructure is in poor enough shape that the public may need little convincing that new funding is needed.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning estimated in its On to 2050 report, which maps out infrastructure growth for the next 30 years, that the state faces a \$24 billion shortfall by 2050 simply to maintain, operate and administer the transportation system as it is today. That does not include new projects, like the proposed expansion of the Red Line to 130th Street.

State and regional governments also are expecting less help from the federal government. President Donald Trump promised a \$1.5 trillion infrastructure program, but it has gone nowhere.

Metra's board of directors, while deciding not to impose a fare increase for 2019, warned that it may have to impose major service cuts. The suburban rail service has been plagued by delays and equipment breakdowns. Many riders are angry, and letting their representatives know.

"Metra is probably one of the biggest issues in my district," said Olsen. "The service reliability issue is a real challenge for us. We get complaints every day from people saying fares go up and the quality is not as good."

Residents also want more transit service, and the agencies say they cannot supply it without more money. For example, Pace's "on the shoulder" bus service on the Stevenson Expressway has seen ridership grow to more than 3,000 riders daily since it started in 2011 and the agency is hearing

complaints of overcrowding, said deputy executive director Rocky Donahue. But Pace cannot afford new buses for the route or garage space to put them in.

"We'd love to put more out there, but without the capital resources, we can't," said Donahue.

The Active Transportation Alliance, an advocacy group, wants at least 40 percent of the funds in a transportation infrastructure bill to go to public transit, along with 2 percent to support biking and walking. The split is typically 80 percent for roads and 20 percent for transit, the alliance said.

Cash-starved transit systems aren't the only way the lack of transportation investment is being felt around the state. Illinois ranked fifth in the nation in the number of "structurally deficient" bridges in 2017, with 2,303 bridges, according to the American Road & Transportation Builders Association, a Washington-based trade group. That category means the bridges need to be repaired or rebuilt.

Mayor Rahm Emanuel said last week that if the legislature does not come up with a bill by May, northeastern Illinois should try to take care of the issue itself. This could mean new fees imposed within the Chicago region to address regional needs.

Even under pressure from constituents and transit and road advocates, the legislature still may not get the job done.

"The public has been left at the altar so many times with feckless promises about our infrastructure," said Michael Sturino, president of the Illinois Road and Transportation Builders Association. He said the state's crumbling infrastructure puts it at a competitive disadvantage, which will hurt the state's chances of wooing big companies like Amazon, which is seeking a site for its second headquarters.

Also expressing pessimism is Joseph Schofer, professor of civil and environmental engineering at Northwestern University.

Schofer predicted that lawmakers will make "wild promises" of using private, nongovernment money to fix potholes and rebuild bridges, when what will really happen is more tolls and more debt. He noted that nationwide, few legislators appear to have lost their jobs for boosting road user fees.

"Voters aren't dumb — at least I hope they're not," said Schofer. "We just need to help them understand the trade-offs, more money for truly better transportation infrastructure."

Passing a capital bill could even be a political boon for lawmakers and whoever becomes governor, said Dillard, a former Republican state senator.

"If Gov. Rauner had prepared a capital construction bill over the last several years, he may have been able to pass some of his agenda," Dillard said. "For a legislator, it makes it easier to go back to the district with some tough votes when you can say, 'Look, we got Naperville Road rebuilt.' It's a great way to get bipartisan cooperation."

Transportation song quiz

Last week's song is named for a New York City bridge, but the bridge is not mentioned in the lyrics. The song is "The 59th Street Bridge Song," also known as "Feelin' Groovy," by Paul Simon. Paul

This disco-era song about a transportation-related job that might not make you rich was later used in a cartoon about sharks. What's the song, and which group originally performed it? The winner gets a Tribune coupon holder, and glory.

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